



Berlin Looks to Superfund to Clean up Mercury Dump

Trish Anderton, 2004-09-30

The city of Berlin hopes a toxic waste site on the banks of its river will someday qualify for a federal Superfund cleanup.

Mercury from the site is leaking into the Androscoggin River.

State and local officials toured the site earlier this week.

NHPR Correspondent Trish Anderton went along and files this report.

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Here's what the NH Dept of Health and Human Services says about Mercury consumption

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Below is a rough transcript. It is not word for word accurate.

Just above Berlin's enormous pulp mill, on the east side of the Androscoggin River, a half-dozen buildings sit on five or six acres.

The land is now empty except for a layer of wood chips.



Woodchips cover an impermeable barrier designed to keep rain out of the waste site.

On the far side of the field, the state's Chief Remediation Engineer, Frederic McGarry, leads a handful of officials to a metal guardrail next to the Androscoggin River.

As they prepare to scramble over, McGarry points out a dam that looms just upstream.

MCGARRY: if I get a phone call that'll be from the people who operate the gates, it will indicate that they'll be opening these gates which means we have to immediately get out of there.

But McGarry is looking for a different kind of threat here, smaller and much more subtle than a rushing river.

On this rocky outcropping by the water, mercury is working its way through cracks in the stone.

Often it's visible as little silver balls, like the mercury from a broken thermometer.

McGarry gets down on his hands and knees, poking around in a puddle of water on the rocks.

MCGARRY: quite often you end up seeing it in these cracks and underneath the silt



About six years ago, cleanup specialists removed 130 pounds of mercury from the site.

area.

Every year they come back and take out another pound or two.

But the rocks have been cleaned recently, and today there isn't much to see.

The mercury probably got into the soil at this site sometime between 1898 and the mid 1950s.

The toxic element was used to make chlorine for the pulping process.

Since then, the mill has changed hands several times.

That leaves no polluters to pay for the cleanup.

The current owner of the land is American Tissue.

They used to own the Pulp and Paper mills until they went bankrupt three years ago.

And although, Fraser Paper has since bought the mills, it didn't buy this piece of land.

Berlin City Manager Pat MacQueen.

MACQUEEN: certainly everybody's concerned, if there's a problem here it needs to be taken care of by the companies that created the problem are no longer around.

In high amounts, mercury can damage the brain and central nervous system in humans.

It's especially a danger to developing fetuses.

McGarry says the Berlin site doesn't pose an immediate threat to people nearby, because there isn't mercury vapor coming out of the ground.

The city's water supply is on the other side of town, so there's no known risk to drinking water.

But once mercury gets into the environment, it may eventually find its way into the food chain.

And McGarry says there's clearly mercury going into the river, and the groundwater.

MCGARRY: when we sampled the groundwater we had dissolved mercury levels at 60 parts per billion. That is not a huge amount, but considering the drinking water standard is 2 ppb, it's significantly above the drinking water standard. We also had lead here too, lead level maybe two or three times the drinking water standard.

Some steps have been taken to control the contamination.

An impermeable cap on the site keeps rainwater from getting in.

There's an underground barrier to keep the mercury from leaking out of the soil.

But a full cleanup could require blasting into the bedrock and cleaning out pools of the element.

That's obviously a costly solution. That's where superfund comes in.

But McGarry says it's not a quick or simple process.

MCGARRY: hopefully we'll get formally listed on the superfund list, and then it's a matter of competing other sites in the other nine regions nationally for funding.

State officials promise to fight hard for money for the cleanup.

DES Commissioner Michael Nolin says Berlin has a compelling case.

NOLIN: I don't know of any other, there may be, any other site of mercury leaking into a river, so remediate this sooner rather than later.

Nolin says there are few other projects in the state competing for Superfund status at the moment

If this site makes it onto the federal list - and if it gets federal funding - cleanup could begin in five years.

For NHPR news, I'm Trish Anderton in Berlin.

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